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In Your Facebook, Not In Your Face.

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In November 2007, following a “Just do it” style presentation from Senior Library Management on Web 2.0 possibilities I created a Facebook Page for Warwick University Library. Just to see what happened. The page took less than a couple of hours to set up, play about with, and make available - much less time than it must take many librarians to create, send out and collate data from the kind of questionnaires I now frequently receive asking how I did it!

For anyone who is unsure about what Facebook is, it is a social web site where members can interact in a myriad of different ways online. Each member has a Profile where they post information about themselves and these Profiles form the platform for much of the interaction which takes place. They can share photos and videos, set up RSS blog feeds, converse in live chat, set up interest groups, organise events, write on discussion boards, play games, exchange virtual hugs, throw pies at each other and bite each other’s imaginary vampires (yes, really, they can) - the list goes on and on. . .

Facebook Pages were created in order to allow organisations and businesses to have a Facebook presence without using “Profiles” which are intended for the use of individual people. Pages allow multiple people to have edit rights without the need to share a password. They also provide administrators with usage statistics and allow for all that targeted marketing (at a price) which Libraries so far have avoided.

The Warwick Library Page has now been live for a year and has changed and developed greatly during that time. This has been possible because of increased student interest and because of the way that Facebook functionality continually develops and evolves. Updating the Page is quick and easy and any mistakes can be quickly removed or rectified.

The involvement of Libraries with Facebook has been a little controversial, with the sceptics arguing that, as Facebook is primarily used as a social space, it is an encroachment on that space to put academic or commercial content there. With this in mind, we asked our Students' Union at Warwick for their opinion about us getting involved and they couldn't have been more positive. In fact they are now linking from their Facebook Pages to ours, and hosting our videos on their Freshers' Pages. But more generally, I think this argument is out of date. In 2007 Facebook membership ceased to be the exclusive domain of University students and was opened up to anyone with a registered email address (1). This of course makes it very profitable advertising space and so Facebook is now filled with sophisticatedly targeted in-your-face ads for everything from apples to Zanzibar. Libraries have not (so far) used this aggressive marketing approach (perhaps partly because you have to pay for it). Library offerings on Facebook are generally confined to Pages and Applications. If you are not looking for us, you are unlikely to know we are there. We are in your Facebook, not in your face. With minimal advertising by Warwick - relying mostly on the viral marketing which happens as a result of being on Facebook anyway - the Warwick Library Facebook Page has (in a year) gathered 770 self-selected "Fans" to date(2).

If you are looking for us, we are easy to find, and once you have added yourself as a Fan of Warwick University Library we can contact you with "Updates" to tell you about new services, vacation loan periods, changes to opening hours, competitions and anything else we feel you should know about. And if you get sick of hearing from us you can switch our Updates off without having to remove yourself from our list of Fans.

Our Fans also have a range of useful tools at their fingertips every time they log into Facebook. They have direct links to the Library's subject specific resource pages, they can access photos and videos we post (very useful following our recent major refurbishment), search some of our bibliographic databases and access COPAC and WorldCat. And the functionality we can offer changes and grows as Facebook

evolves. The most recent addition to our Page is an Application which allows us to RSS all three of our Subject Teams blogs into Facebook.

As well as Pages and Profiles, Facebook is choc-full of Applications. Applications are gadgets which members can add to their Profiles which allow users to do anything and everything from calculating their Body Mass Index to comparing their movie preferences with friends and sending each other plants for their virtual gardens ...or even searching their Library's catalogue.

Our Library Management System Co-ordinator found some code posted on an LMS forum by Ryerson University Library which could be adapted to build a Facebook catalogue search application for Warwick. It took our Systems Specialist less than half a day to build, test and launch the application, which currently has 44 fans, 46 monthly active users (this is higher during term time) and a total of 663 people who have installed it (3).

Once into the catalogue these users then have all kinds of additional Web 2.0 functionality and mash ups such as the option to add catalogue record links to their del.ici.ous accounts, link to the Internet Movie Database to view clips and synopses of DVDs we have in stock, and access Amazon content such as book reviews etc. Our Facebook Application is now also acting as a gateway into lots of other Web 2.0 gadgets which have now been employed within our OPAC thanks to our forward-thinking Metadata Librarians. A Facebook presence is much more than a presence on Facebook.

When the project started I fully expected almost all of our fans would be undergraduates, and a few curious librarians from other institutions. However, a quick look down the list of Fans today shows me a high number of Warwick postgraduates, staff and alumni. Many of our Fans do not disclose their relationship to the University, and so we will never really know who is using our Facebook service. But, knowing that researchers and postgraduates are signing up as Fans tells us that we could, if we chose to, advertise our targeted postgraduate portfolio as well as our more general services.

So far very little energy has been invested in our Facebook project, and we are already seeing returns in the form of a growing base of online Fans we can easily contact and a raised online profile. Statistics from our official web site show that the links from our Facebook Page are being used to access our subject specific resources, perhaps not as much as we would like, but it is happening. So we are starting to consider future possibilities for Facebook involvement. Ideas being thrown around include the creation of a Fines Calculator Application and the possibility of fielding library enquiries and feedback through a discussion board. Who knows, perhaps by this time next year our Facebook fans will be pitting their Virtual Subject Librarians against each other in a battle of search-skills prowess.

1. Phillips S. A brief history of Facebook. Guardian News and Media Limited; 2007 [updated 28th August 2007; cited 2008 17th November 2008]; Available from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2007/jul/25/media.newmedia>.
2. University Of Warwick. University of Warwick Library Facebook Page. 2008 [cited 2008 12th December 2008]; Available from: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Coventry-United-Kingdom/University-Of-Warwick-Library/6168162503>.
3. Statistics taken from University of Warwick Application Admin pages (unpublished) [accessed 5th December 2008]